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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify junior high school students' perceptions of careers and the world of work. The participants included 32 seventh-, 132 eighth-, and 131 ninth-grade students in urban and rural public schools in central Arkansas. Ethnically, 57% of the students were Anglo-American and 40% were African-American. The students were equally divided between males and females. The participants were given the "Debunking Occupational Myths: A Quiz" assessment. Results indicate that the mean of all grade levels was not significantly different. From a gender perspective, eighth-grade males responded incorrectly less often than seventh- and ninth-grade males. Females tended to respond similarly across the grade levels. Ethnically, Anglo-American and rural ninth graders responded incorrectly more often than the lower two grades. The findings of the study indicate that junior high students do not demonstrate adequate career awareness and exploration understanding. The findings also indicate that cultural and ethnical concerns are not being addressed very well. The findings imply that more career education efforts be employed and that differentiated learning styles should be addressed appropriately. (Twenty-two references and the assessment instrument are included.) (NLA)

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Career Education in the Junior High School:

What is the Current Situation?

by

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Career Education in the Junior High School:

What is the Current Situation?

Research studies projecting the future career outlook in the United States have indicated an extremely varied and optimistic future for current junior high students (Olney, 1988). Labor saving technology will be one of the main causes of employment shifts among industries. As technology grows, specialized services will be in greater demand than ever. A sharp increase in business service industries also will provide more demand for employment growth. Most of the new jobs will develop in the West and the South, where the population continues to increase. In the years ahead, more women will enter the work force as well.

The high-status, high-paying jobs will be filled primarily by individuals with a college degree. Junior high students should be made aware of these job market opportunities and educational prerequisites. However, students should be made equally aware of the importance of not being discouraged from careers requiring a college degree if an occupation which does not suits

the student's interests and abilities. Employers will still be seeking qualified personnel at all levels, including entry-level employees to whom employers are willing to give on-the-job training.

Labor forecasters believe that current figures indicate that labor shortages may extend into the next century. For students to take advantage of these opportunities, however, they should be aware of the standards involved, prerequisite qualifications, and the degree of job-related training necessary. In addition, Derr (1988) has emphasized that school counselors need to encourage students to become more career-oriented rather than merely looking for a job.

The purpose of this article is to present some research data relative to junior high school students and their perceptions (or misperceptions) of careers and the world of work. To prepare the stage for this data, a brief overview of the most important developmental characteristics will be presented.

BRIEF REVIEW OF DEVELOPMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF JUNIOR HIGH STUDENTS

The factors that contribute to the nature of early adolescents' experiences are not simple. They include physiological, cognitive, social, and cultural forces. These complex, interacting influences have much impact on the personal adjustments and experiences of the junior high adolescent, including their career awareness.

Cognitive Development. The junior high years are transitional years cognitively, from Piagetian concrete operations to formal operations (Wadsworth, 1971). With the attainment of formal operations, students become able to develop concepts without the aid of direct physical experiences. The student can respond to verbally presented conceptual material. Conceptual development can also proceed based on the student's actions on written materials.

The junior high student with formal operations typically has the cognitive structural equipment to think "as well as" adults. This does not infer that these students' thoughts are necessarily "as good as"

adult thoughts in a particular instance, only that the attainment of formal operations infers that a new potentiality has been achieved. However, the majority of junior high students will not have attained this level of cognitive functioning according to Renner and associates (1976).

In addition, peer interactions become important with respect to cognitive development. For example, the student becomes able to assimilate contrasting viewpoints of others. Also, the student develops more rational coping mechanisms to deal with conflicts and crises. From a cultural perspective, peer acceptance is more important to African-American males than to any other group of students (Dent, 1989). Native American students also have a high peer influence index (Bobo, 1985).

Concurrently, the young adolescent is experiencing such rapid changes emotionally, physically, and intellectually, he or she quite naturally becomes self-centered (Elkind, 1980). This egocentric tendency often creates an aversion to individualized contact with adults at school and elsewhere. Group counseling

or group activities centered around developmentally relevant issues (e.g., work values, career options) may be preferred over individual counseling by junior high school students.

Physical Development. The physical changes associated with puberty are the most dramatic primary changes of adolescence. Pubescence (the period of physical changes leading to reproductive maturity) and puberty (the point at which reproductive maturity is reached) include many alterations in the appearance and function of primary sex characteristics. More obvious, however, are secondary sex characteristics, including voice changes and facial hair in boys, enlargement of breasts in girls, and the growth of pubic and axillary hair in both sexes.

Coinciding with the changes brought about by pubescence is the physical growth during adolescence. The changes in height, strength and physical capacity are most obvious to the observer. The patterns of growth are often very different in males and females during adolescence as well. Psychological effects from

these physical changes are mediated by responses from parents, peers, and adolescents themselves.

Psychosocial Development. The single concept that is universally accepted relative to the process of adolescence is identity development. Erikson (1981) describes this period as one of resolving the crisis of personal identity. Erikson viewed adolescence as a time of interactive turbulent forces. Identity development is viewed as the interaction of individual personality with sociocultural issues. How junior high students view themselves and how others view them form the foundation of their adult personality. Without a solid foundation, identity diffusion results. The process of identity development occurs at different rates as the adolescent gradually resolves psychosocial issues (Chisholm, 1980)

Career Development. Self-exploration seems to be a natural phenomenon during this period, whether or not the school fosters such exploratory behaviors. Career development concepts such as compromise and consistency (or lack thereof) between aspirations and expectations become operational as realities.

Idealistic fervor or naivete get their first temperings in the reality testing of curricular, athletic, and part-time work experiences (Herr & Cramer, 1984). Aubrey's (1978) research of the 1970s resulted in many insights into the career development of 13-year olds. The more meaningful ones for our discussion are:

1. Although almost all 13-year olds can identify something they would like to do better, only about three fourths have actually tried to find out how to do it better.
2. When asked to state their strong and weak interest activities in terms of self-improvement, 13-year olds' answers cluster in the group sports, school, and academic areas.
3. When asked to list 10 things to be considered in choosing a job or career, most 13-year olds can list 2 things and less than half can list more than five.
4. The first choices of 13-year olds for future jobs tend to be occupations generally

requiring college degrees or lengthy training periods beyond high school.

Other research efforts have yielded additional information about career development in junior high students. Miller (1988) has indicated that vocational behaviors such as occupational decision making are a prolonged developmental process, beginning at least as early as elementary school grades. Goldstein and Oldham (1979) discovered that by the end of junior high school, most students recognized the connectedness among education, jobs, wealth, and social class. The eighth and ninth grades are the first instances in the typical student's life in which serious career decisions become a reality (Herr & Cramer, 1984). For example, junior high students make decisions about specific courses, high school curricula, a certain high school, or an area vocational or technical school. As junior high students develop an awareness of prestige differences among jobs and careers, their aspirations start to reflect a concern with prestige level. Paradoxically, boys' occupational preferences seem to shift away from blue-collar work toward major

professional and executive jobs, whereas girls seem to shift toward lower-level jobs from lesser professional to semiprofessional and clerical work (Gottfredson, 1981)

Parental influence affects career choice among junior high students as well. According to Reschke and Knierim (1987), parents feel their influence is moderate to low, while students feel their parents' influence is high. This discrepancy is probably related to students gaining autonomy and separating from their parents. Tension is created by this concern of parents and the need to become independent by students, resulting in a tendency to avoid careers suggested by parents in order to establish autonomy. Consequently, good parental advice is often ignored.

Parental and family influences on career choice dynamics and structure are also affected by culture and ethnicity. Traditional Native American children are allowed to explore and be independent as soon as they are able. They are permitted to learn from their mistakes. Native American parents follow a policy of

non-interference and observe their children as they experience learning by doing (More 1989). Such freedom lends itself very nicely to career exploration events.

The preceding text has presented information relative to the most significant developmental concerns of junior high students. A review of a research activity will now be presented to reinforce what previous research has indicated.

METHOD

Participants

The study was conducted in several public schools in central Arkansas, both urban and rural. The participants included 295 seventh (n = 32), eighth (n = 132), and ninth (n = 131) grade students. Ethnically, 57% of the students were Anglo American and 40% were African American. The remaining three percent included Asian and Native Americans. The students were equally divided between males and females. Figure 1 presents the frequency distribution of the participants.

PLACE FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Instrument & Procedure

The participating junior high students were given the "Debunking Occupational Myths: A Quiz" assessment (Miller, 1988) (see Chart A). This instrument consists of 10 true or false items with each item addressing a widely held myth about career development that is age appropriate. The instrument was administered by the regular classroom teacher under the supervision of the local guidance counselor. The teacher was instructed to read any item and to define any word(s) that presented difficulty to student understanding of each item. Atmospheric conditions were consistent with those required for testing situations. All answers are presumed to be honest responses.

Place Chart A about Here

Statistical analysis for the purposes of this article included the assessment of frequency distribution of the sample population, frequency of the total number of items answered incorrectly by the sample population, frequency of the total number of

items answered incorrectly by grade, and an analysis of variance of the frequency of incorrect responses. Limitations for generalization perhaps may be noted for the disproportionate percentages of seventh graders, rural schools, ethnic minorities (exclusive of African Americans, and the lack of private school students.

RESULTS

Figure 2 shows the frequency distribution of the number of items answered incorrectly by the various variables. Results indicate that the mean of all grade levels was not significantly different. From a gender perspective, eighth grade males tended to respond incorrectly less than seventh and ninth grade males. Females tended to respond similarly across the grade levels. Ethnically, Anglo-American ninth graders tended to respond incorrectly more often than the lower two grade levels. This tendency also appeared for rural ninth graders.

Figure 3 depicts the frequency distribution of the items answered incorrectly by grade level. Over 85% answered items two through six incorrectly. Figure 4 presents an ANOVA of incorrect responses by the five

variables of gender, type of school attended, area of residence, ethnicity, and grade level of this study's entire sample (N= 763, 5th-12th grades). Note that significant variances were found between gender (p =.02), area (p =.01), ethnicity (p =.01), and grade level (p =.01). The variable of school type (public or private) did not produce a between-groups variance of significance.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study provides information revealing the perceptions of junior high students relative to career information and the world of work.

The findings of this study give an indication that junior high students do not demonstrate adequate career awareness and exploration understanding, at least on the instrument and population used. This finding tends to support those of Aubrey (1978). A brief revisit with the test items of the instrument used will support this contention. Certainly by junior high school, students should demonstrate more career awareness than what this sample indicated. An obvious conclusion is

that not enough attention and emphasis have been rendered in these students' educational experiences.

The findings in addition give an indication that cultural and ethnical concerns are not being addressed very well if at all. Perhaps, the educators are not cognizant of cultural and ethnical differentiations. For example, research has shown that African-American males have few positive role models in the educational setting and view the school and the academic setting as feminine and not relevant to their lives (Holland, 1987). Positive role models can be located within and outside the schools. These career models need to be made more available in schools for ethnic minorities than what is currently being evidenced.

More (1989) has researched the important learning style differences between Native Americans and non-Native Americans. Career learning can often be presented as watch-then-do (learning to make a fishnet) or listen-then-do (learning values through legends taught by an elder) or think-then-do (thinking through a response carefully and thoroughly before speaking). In addition, research efforts have concluded that

Holland's personality typologies and satisfaction with vocational environment can be used successfully with Native American students (Hurlburt, Schulz, & Eide, 1985). Holland's Self Directed Search has been proven to be a quite reliable vocational interest inventory with Native American students Gade, Fuqua, & Hurlburt, 1988). A more determined effort by counselors and teachers to implement such research efforts would certainly help decrease the existence of any career myths among Native American students (Herring, 1990).

The findings also have implications for counselors and teachers in terms of the lack of career educative efforts being employed. Many career development strategies and activities for multicultural populations are available to counselors and teachers. Many more are available without addressing cultural concerns. For example, the self-concept enhancement strategy of McDavis and Parker (1979) is a group interaction strategy in which ethnic minority students and one or more group leaders participate in discussions focusing on:

1) becoming aware of, and accepting their cultural heritage;
2) identifying role models in various occupations with whom they can identify and respect;
3) identifying success experiences among them that show creative expression or accomplishment of challenging tasks; and
4) giving peer support and feedback so that students share common feelings, problems, fears, needs, and gain the security to explore themselves and their world.

Neimeyer and Fukuyama (1984) developed the Cultural Attitudes Repertory Technique (CART) as a flexible instrument that can be useful in examining certain facets of cultural world views. Counselors could use this instrument to assess their own cultural attitudes. Through the use of self-exploration exercises, this strategy can be helpful in assisting counselors to articulate those private dimensions of judgment that may otherwise remain implicit in their cross-cultural and multicultural interventions.

A final implication exists in the possibility that differentiated learning styles are not being addressed appropriately. This finding also infers the lack of attention being given to a student's level of cognitive functioning as well. Counselors and teachers might be advised to make increased effort to ensure that each junior high school student is receiving career and general education experiences which incorporate diverse learning styles and appropriate cognitive tasks. A brief review of the Piagetian cognitive developmental model and of current research on learning style differences may be warranted. Appropriate strategies and interventions would be incorporated to provide a more beneficial educational experience.

SUMMARY

Career development is of utmost importance to junior high students. Their future employment, unemployment, and underemployment hinge upon the degree of career education they receive during their school years. Cultural, ethnical, and socioeconomic factors complicate the delivery of adequate and appropriate career education. The period of adolescence provides

its own unique influences. Counselors and teachers who successfully deliver career education to their students will reap the rewards by seeing their students succeed in their career choices. Student success will likewise be measured by the degree of appropriate and adequate career education they have experienced.

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Figure 1

Frequency Distribution of Participants by Grade, Gender, Ethnicity, Type of School Attended, & Area of Residence and School (N = 295)

	GRADE LEVEL 7	8	9	Totals
Frequency	32	132	131	295
%	11	45	44	100
Gender				
Male	18	63	66	147
Female	14	69	65	148
Ethnicity				
African American	0	49	69	118
Anglo American	31	78	60	169
Asian American	0	1	0	1
Native American	1	4	2	7
Spanish American	0	0	0	0
Type of School attended				
Public	32	132	131	295
Private	0	0	0	0
Area of Residence & School				
Rural	32	29	38	99
Urban	0	103	93	196

Chart A

Debunking Occupational Myths: A Quiz

1. The goal of career counseling is to find the one perfect occupation (F).

2. Once a decision has been made it should be pursued to the end (F).

3. Although most youngsters are not sure of what they want to do vocationally, most are fairly sure of what they do not want to do or be when they grow up (T).

4. Certain "types" of people seem to be employed in certain "kinds" of work (T).

5. The main purpose of an interest test is to be able to tell a student what occupation he or she should choose (F).

6. Occupational prestige is one factor to consider when selecting an occupation (T).

7. Your worth as a person should be determined by the type of occupation you have (F).

8. Talking with someone actually employed in a job that you find interesting is a good way of finding out about the work world (T).

9. The process of making a decision many times causes feelings of anxiety and self-doubt (T).

10. Deciding on a college major or some type of occupation should be complete by your junior year in high school (F).

Figure 2

Frequency of Items answered incorrectly by Grade, Gender, Ethnicity, Type of School Attended, & Area of Residence and School.

	Grade Level		
	7 (3.75)	8 (3.43)	9 (3.83)
Gender			
Male	4.06	3.49	4.03
Female	3.36	3.38	3.63
Ethnicity			
African American	0.00	3.90	3.72
Anglo American	3.77	3.21	4.02
Asian American	0.00	0.00	0.00
Native American	3.00	3.00	2.00
Spanish American	0.00	0.00	0.00
Type of School			
Public	3.75	3.43	3.83
Private	0.00	0.00	0.00
Area of Residence and School			
Rural	3.75	3.69	4.11
Urban	0.00	3.36	3.72

Figure 3

Total Score (Incorrect Responses) by Grade

	Value	Frequency	Percent
Grade Level			
7	2.00	6	18.8
	3.00	7	21.9
	4.00	11	34.4
	5.00	5	15.6
	6.00	3	9.4
	Total	32	100.0
8	.00	5	3.8
	1.00	12	9.1
	2.00	21	15.9
	3.00	37	28.0
	4.00	26	19.7
	5.00	13	9.8
	6.00	10	7.6
	7.00	5	3.8
	8.00	3	2.3
	Total	132	100.0
9	.00	2	1.5
1.00	8	6.1	
	2.00	19	14.5
	3.00	28	21.4
	4.00	28	21.4
	5.00	26	19.8
	6.00	12	9.2
	7.00	7	5.3
	8.00	1	.8
	Total	131	100.0